Vicente SEGRELLES

THE MERCENARY

1. The Cult of the Sacred Fire

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GRAPHIC NOVELS

Vicente SEGRELLES

THE MERCENARY

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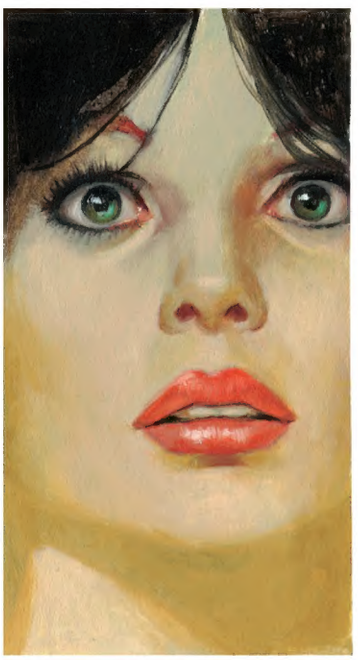
...AND SHE SHALL BE SUSPENDED BY HER ARMS FROM THE POLE AT NOON. YOU KNOW HOW LONG IT TAKES TO DIE IN THAT POSITION. THAT'S HOW LONG YOU HAVE TO PAY THE RANSOM.
THERE SHE IS...
1

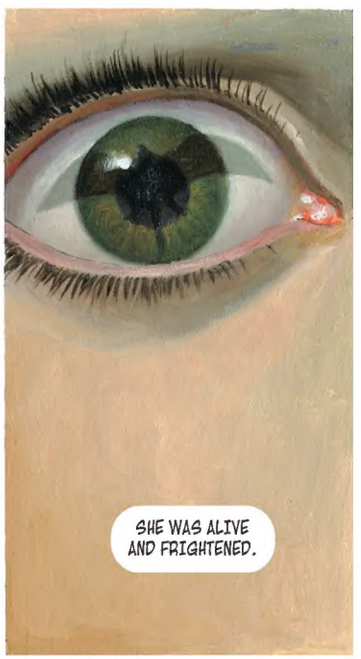
SO FAR, SO GOOD... THEY HAVE SEEN ME FOR A WHILE AND HAVEN'T MADE ANY MOVES...

I HOPE SHE'S STILL ALIVE.

WHILE THEY THINK I'M COMING TO PAY THE RANSOM, I'LL GAIN PRECIOUS TIME TO TAKE CARE OF THIS MY WAY...

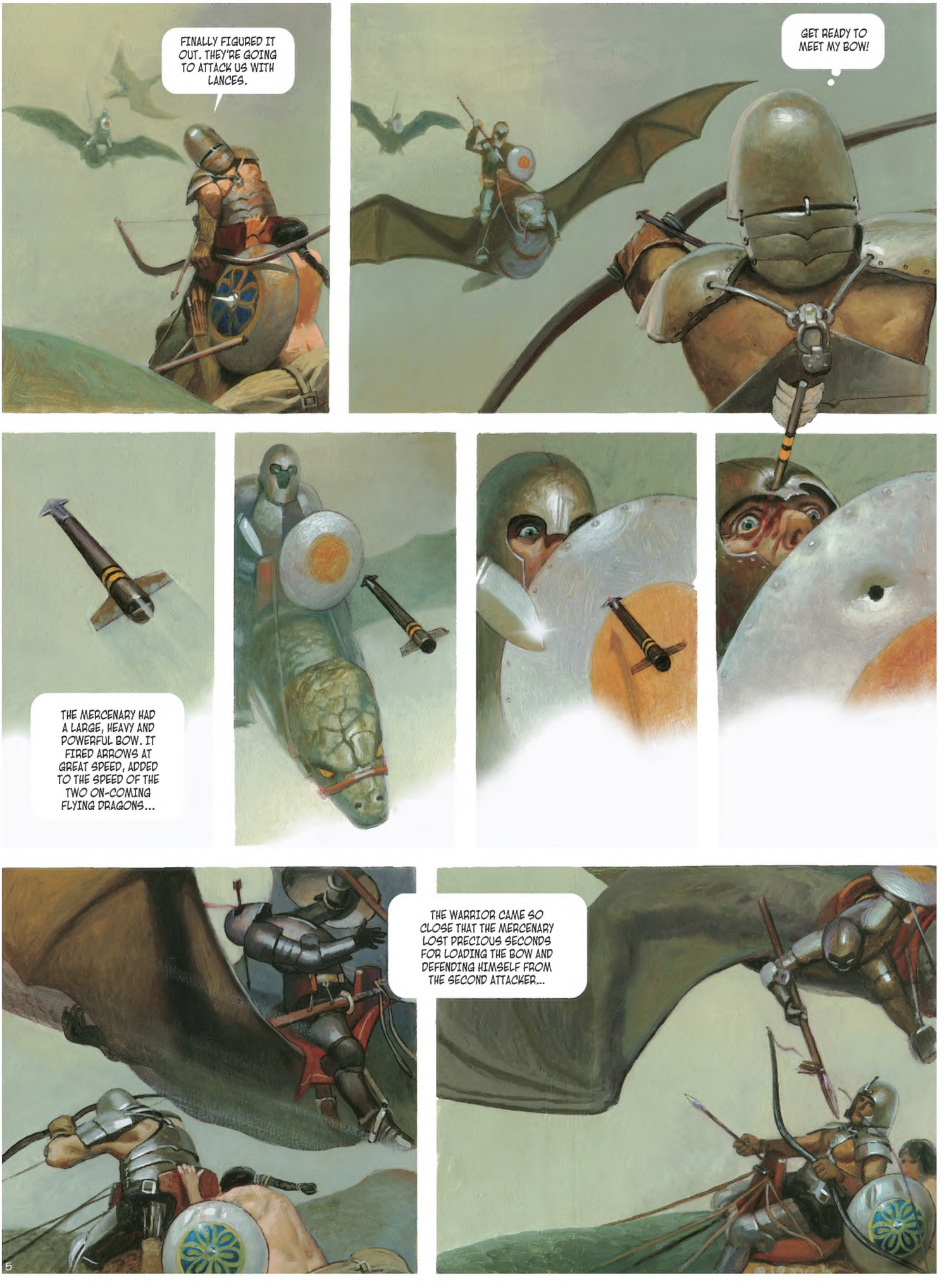
2




SHE WAS ALIVE AND FRIGHTENED.

HOLD ON A BIT LONGER, I'M GOING TO GET YOU OUT OF HERE!
3

MY LADY, LET'S GO HOME.
DAMN! THE INTERCEPTORS HAVE ARRIVED!
IT DID SEEM STRANGE.... MY LADY, GET BEHIND ME AND PROTECT YOURSELF WITH THE SHIELD.
HOW COULD YOU THINK TO COME WITH THIS MOUNT?
PATIENCE, MY LADY. SHE'S SLOW, BUT HER SKIN IS ARROW-PROOF, ESPECIALLY IF THEY'RE FIRING FROM SO FAR AWAY.
ALSO, SHE CAN CLIMB HIGHER THAN THE MOUNTS. AND THEIR KNOW IT. SOON THEY WILL RISK IT AND COME INTO MY TERRITORY.
4


FINALLY FIGURED IT OUT. THEY'RE GOING TO ATTACK US WITH LANCES.
GET READY TO MEET MY BOW!
THE MERCENARY HAD A LARGE, HEAVY AND POWERFUL BOW. IT FIRED ARROWS AT GREAT SPEED, ADDED TO THE SPEED OF THE TWO ON-COMING FLYING DRAGONS...
THE WARRIOR CAME SO CLOSE THAT THE MERCENARY LOST PRECIOUS SECONDS FOR LOADING THE BOW AND DEFENDING HIMSELF FROM THE SECOND ATTACKER...
5

WITHOUT A BOW, WE'RE DEFENSELESS! OUR ONLY HOPE IS THAT THEY GET BOLD AND COME CLOSE ENOUGH...
GOOD, THEY'RE PLAYING INTO MY HANDS.
YH!
YYHC!!
THE WOUND IS PRETTY BAD. IT'S BLEEDING A LOT...I DON'T THINK WE'LL GET VERY FAR... IF WE CAN AT LEAST CROSS THOSE PEAKS, WE'LL BE SAFE!

SHE WON'T MAKE IT.
SHE HAS TO MAKE IT! SHE HAS TO GET OVER, NO MATTER WHAT.
SHE HAS NO MORE STRENGTH! IF SHE DIES NOW, WE'RE TOAST!
THAT PLATEAU IS OUR ONLY CHANCE!
I DON'T KNOW IF SHE CAN LAND ON SOMETHING SO SMALL. SHE DOESN'T EVEN HAVE STRENGTH TO LAND.
SHE'S NOT LISTENING TO MY HAND. SHE'S HEADING THERE BY INSTINCT.
SSTUMP!
SHE'S DEAD!

QUICK! BRING ME THAT AXE!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING? ARE YOU CRAZY?
WHEN I ACCEPT A RISKY JOB, I SELECT MY MOUNT WITH GREAT CARE. THIS FEMALE WAS ABOUT TO GIVE BIRTH.
THIS ISN'T THE FIRST TIME THAT A FLEDGLING HAS GOTTEN ME OUT OF A BIND.
YYCK!
NOW AS SOON AS HIS WINGS DRY OFF, HE WILL TAKE FLIGHT. SO WE HAVE TO BE READY. THESE YOUNG ONES SEARCH OUT THEIR FIRST MEAL RIGHT AWAY.
8

TAKE THE BLANKET FROM MY HARNESS, AND PUT IT ON. THE SUN IS SETTING AND IT WILL GET COLD SOON.
HOLD ON TIGHT. HE'S ABOUT TO TAKE OFF.
HIS INSTINCTS WILL LEAD HIM TO THE AREA WHERE THE LICHENS HE FEEDS ON GROW. FROM THERE IT WILL BE EASY TO REACH YOUR HUSBAND'S CASTLE.
SHIT! HE'S NOT PULLING UP.
IT'S TOO MUCH WEIGHT! BUT AT THIS SPEED, HE OUGHT TO BE ABLE TO FLY A STEADY COURSE!

HOLD ON TIGHT! WE'RE GOING TO CRASH!
TOOMP!
ARE YOU ALRIGHT?
I THINK SO...
WE SHOULD FIND A SAFE PLACE TO SPEND THE NIGHT. THERE ARE DANGEROUS ANIMALS AROUND HERE...
I'M BEGINNING TO WONDER IF YOU CAN GET ME OUT OF THIS MESS!
DON'T YOU WORRY, MY LADY. I'VE GOTTEN OUT OF WORSE JAMS THAN THIS...LOOK, OVER THERE SHOULD BE ALRIGHT!

THIS ISN'T BAD. TOMORROW IN THE DAYLIGHT THINGS WILL LOOK BETTER.
I WARN YOU... WE'LL HAVE TO SHARE THE BLANKET.
IF IT CAN'T BE HELPED...
DON'T BE AFRAID. I KNOW WELL WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF YOUR HUSBAND HAD ANY REASON TO COMPLAIN.
I DON'T KNOW WHY HE SHOULD EVER HAVE A REASON IF HE NEVER FINDS OUT...
MY LADY...WHAT ARE YOU...
WHAT DO YOU SAY... YOU TAKE ME AWAY, FAR AWAY FROM MY HORRIBLE, DISGUSTING HUSBAND...TO A FRIEND'S HOUSE...HE WILL BE GENEROUS WITH YOU, AS I TOO CAN BE...

MY LADY, I HAVE A JOB AND I MUST SEE IT THROUGH.
I GATHER YOUR HUSBAND IS NOT A GREAT MAN...ESPECIALLY IF HE'D RATHER RISK YOUR LIFE THAN PAY THE RANSOM. BUT, I AM A PROFESSIONAL AND I HAVE A REPUTATION TO PROTECT. I'LL TAKE YOU BACK AS AGREED.
DAMN YOU, MERCENARY... YOU'LL PAY FOR THIS!
..RRRRR
RRR...
DAMN!
WE'RE IN SOME CARNIVORE'S DEN. QUICK! LET'S GET OUT OF HERE!
12
THERE'S NO ESCAPE, HE'LL GET US ANYWAY. WE MUST PUT UP A FIGHT! GET AS FAR AWAY AS YOU CAN!

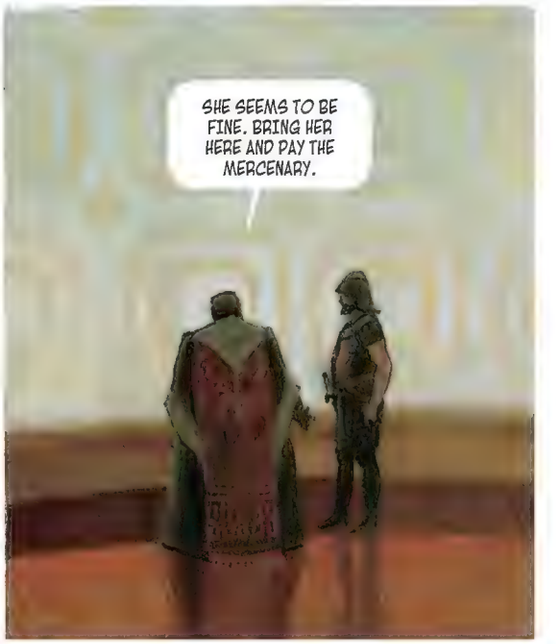
GROOMM!!!
CRAK!
GRAMM...
CRAEK

YOU CAN COME CLOSER NOW, MY LADY. THE BEAST IS DEAD AND HE WILL HELP US GET OUT OF HERE.
YOU KIDDING?
NOPE, BUT YOU HAVE TO HELP ME. WE MUST WORK FAST BEFORE HE BEGINS TO GROW STIFF. YOU SHOULD START CUTTING STRIPS OF HIS SKIN.
DON'T WORRY, THIS IS NOT THE FIRST TIME THAT I'VE DONE THIS. SOON WE'LL HAVE RISING GUSTS OF AIR—THAT WILL BE THE TIME TO GO.

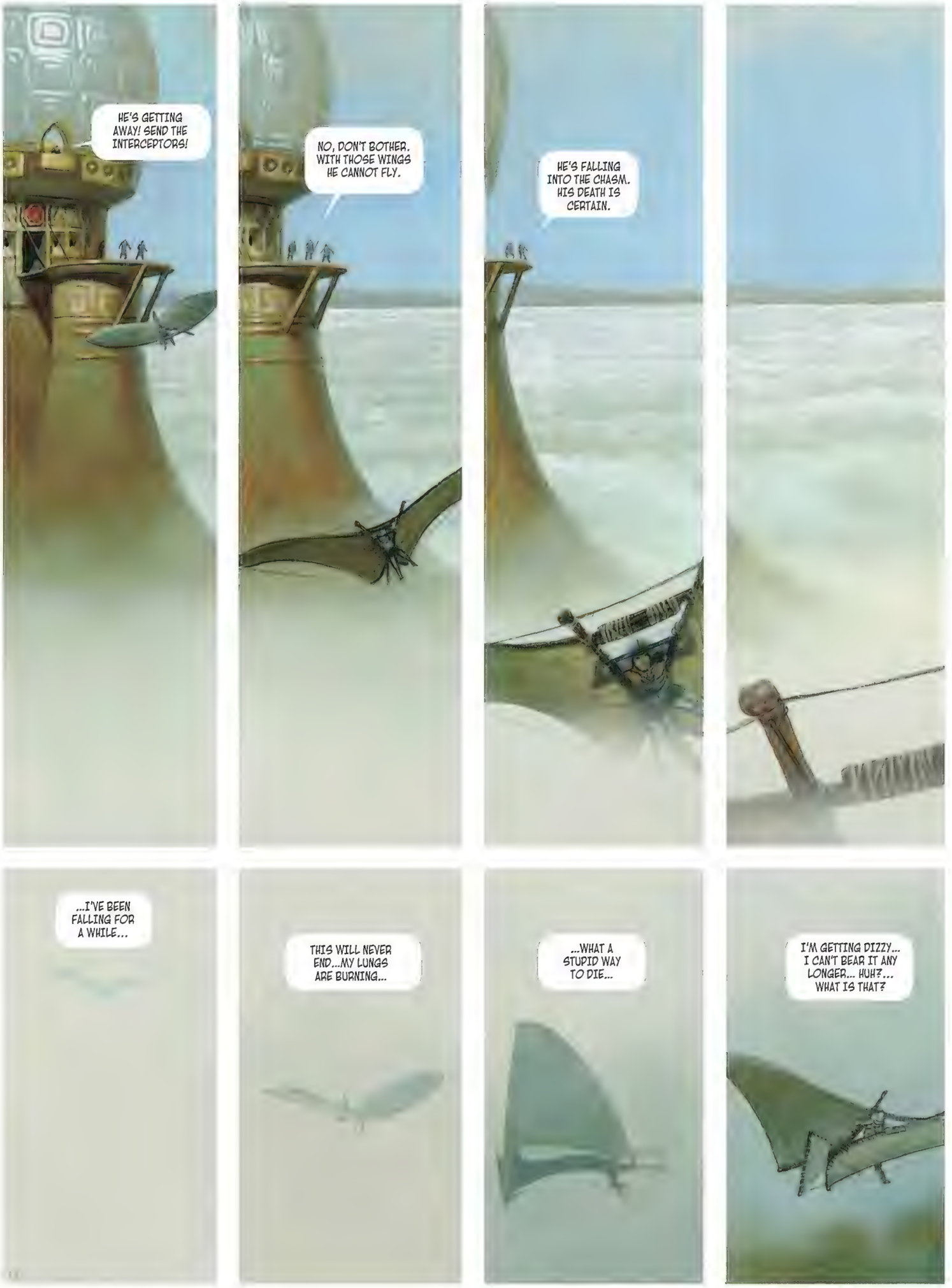
MY GOD, THIS IS CRAZY. WE'LL NEVER MAKE IT.
IF THIS MAKESHIFT CRAFT HOLDS TOGETHER, I ASSURE YOU THAT YOU'LL BE BACK AT YOUR CASTLE BY LUNCH.

MASTER, COME HERE! OVER THERE, TO THE WEST, THAT STRANGE SIGHT!

IT'S THE MERCENARY AND HE HAS YOUR WIFE WITH HIM!


SHE SEEMS TO BE FINE. BRING HER HERE AND PAY THE MERCENARY.

MY DARLING, HOW I HAVE MISSED YOUR CARESSES...
I SEE YOU'RE ALRIGHT. THAT MERCENARY HAS DONE GOOD WORK. I'VE ALREADY ORDERED HIM TO BE PAID AS PROMISED.
YOU ARE TOO HASTY, MY LORD. HE BROUGHT ME BACK, YES, BUT DISGRACED. HE RAPED ME!
WHAT?!
GUARDS! KILL THAT BASTARD!
THE SNAKE HAS SPIT HER VENOM. I HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE.
16


HE'S GETTING AWAY! SEND THE INTERCEPTORS!
NO, DON'T BOTHER. WITH THOSE WINGS HE CANNOT FLY.
HE'S FALLING INTO THE CHASM. HIS DEATH IS CERTAIN.
...I'VE BEEN FALLING FOR A WHILE...
THIS WILL NEVER END...MY LUNGS ARE BURNING...
...WHAT A STUPID WAY TO DIE...
I'M GETTING DIZZY... I CAN'T BEAR IT ANY LONGER... HUH?... WHAT IS THAT?

GOOD GOD! THERE'S ANOTHER WORLD UNDER THE BLANKET OF CLOUDS...

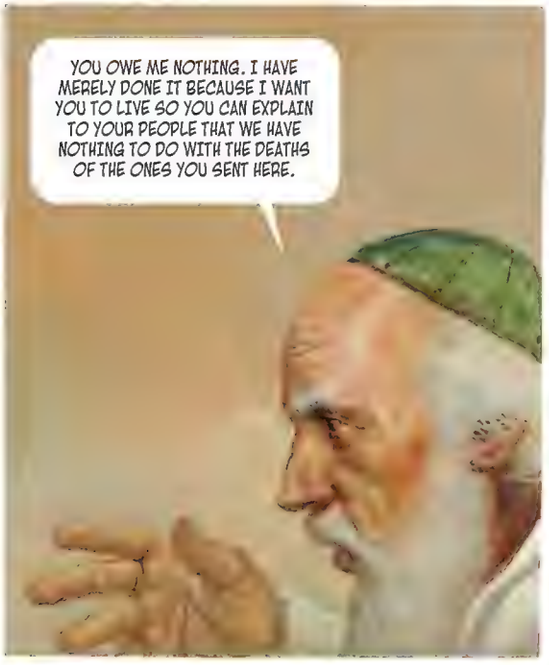
IF I COULD MAKE IT...MAYBE SOMEONE WOULD HELP ME...

I...CAN'T... I...CAN'T...

DRINK A LITTLE MORE. YOU WILL FEEL BETTER.

YES...YES...IT SEEMS TO BE HELPING... CAN I ASK WHAT YOU ARE GIVING ME?

AN HERBAL EXTRACT TO CURE YOUR ALTITUDE SICKNESS.
WHAT A BREW... I AM IN YOUR DEBT, BUT... WHO ARE YOU?


YOU OWE ME NOTHING. I HAVE MERELY DONE IT BECAUSE I WANT YOU TO LIVE SO YOU CAN EXPLAIN TO YOUR PEOPLE THAT WE HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THE DEATHS OF THE ONES YOU SENT HERE.

THE ONES WE SENT HERE? I CAN ONLY SAY THAT IN MY COUNTRY WE KNOW NOTHING OF YOUR EXISTENCE.
THEN WHO KIDNAPPED OUR CHIEF'S DAUGHTER?

NOT US. FROM BIRTH WE ARE TOLD THAT TO TRAVEL THROUGH THE CLOUDS MEANS DEATH. SOME WHO HAVE BRAVED THEM ARE NEVER HEARD FROM AGAIN.

YES, WE HAVE SEEN THEM FALL FROM TIME TO TIME WITH THOSE FLYING ANIMALS, AND ALL HAVE DIED. BUT WE HAVE NO OTHER EXPLANATION. THIS KIDNAPPING HAS TO HAVE BEEN FROM YOUR PEOPLE.
WELL, EXCUSE ME, BUT I FIND THAT HARD TO BELIEVE. I WOULD SAY MORE LIKELY IT WAS SOMEONE FROM HERE BELOW.

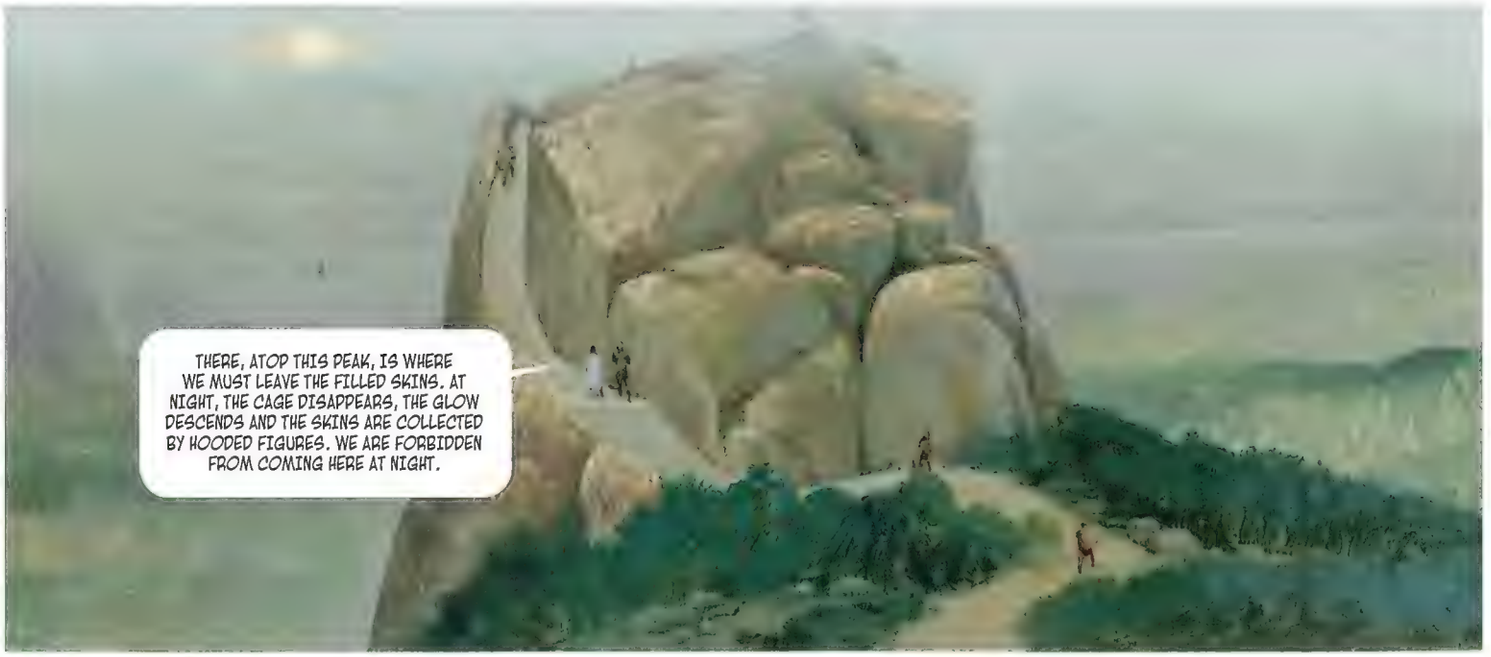
IMPOSSIBLE! DO YOU SEE THAT LIGHT IN THE CLOUDS? IF YOU LOOK CLOSELY THERE IS SOMETHING HANGING, IT IS A CAGE. INSIDE IS OUR CHIEF'S DAUGHTER. NO ONE FROM THIS LAND COULD DO THAT.
NOR FROM MINE. WE FLY, BUT WE ARE NOT CAPABLE OF SUCH MAGIC!

I SEE. I'M GLAD I SAVED YOUR LIFE. THE PEOPLE OF THIS TOWN ARE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE MAKING ALCOHOL...ONE THOUSANDS SKINS OF ALCOHOL IS THE RANSOM. I WILL GO ON AHEAD AND EXPLAIN TO THEM WHAT YOU HAVE TOLD ME.

ALCOHOL? WHAT A BUNCH OF LUSHES! IT'S SO EASY TO DEMAND GOLD.

GRANDFATHER HAS TOLD ME EVERYTHING. YOUR EXPLANATION MAKES SENSE AND WE BELIEVE YOU. BUT NOW, WE ARE MORE CONFUSED THAN EVER.
I ALSO DO NOT UNDERSTAND... IF YOU ALLOW ME, I WOULD LIKE TO HELP YOU. IN MY COUNTRY I AM A WARRIOR-FOR-HIRE AND I DEDICATE MY LIFE TO SOLVING PROBLEMS OF THIS KIND...PERHAPS...

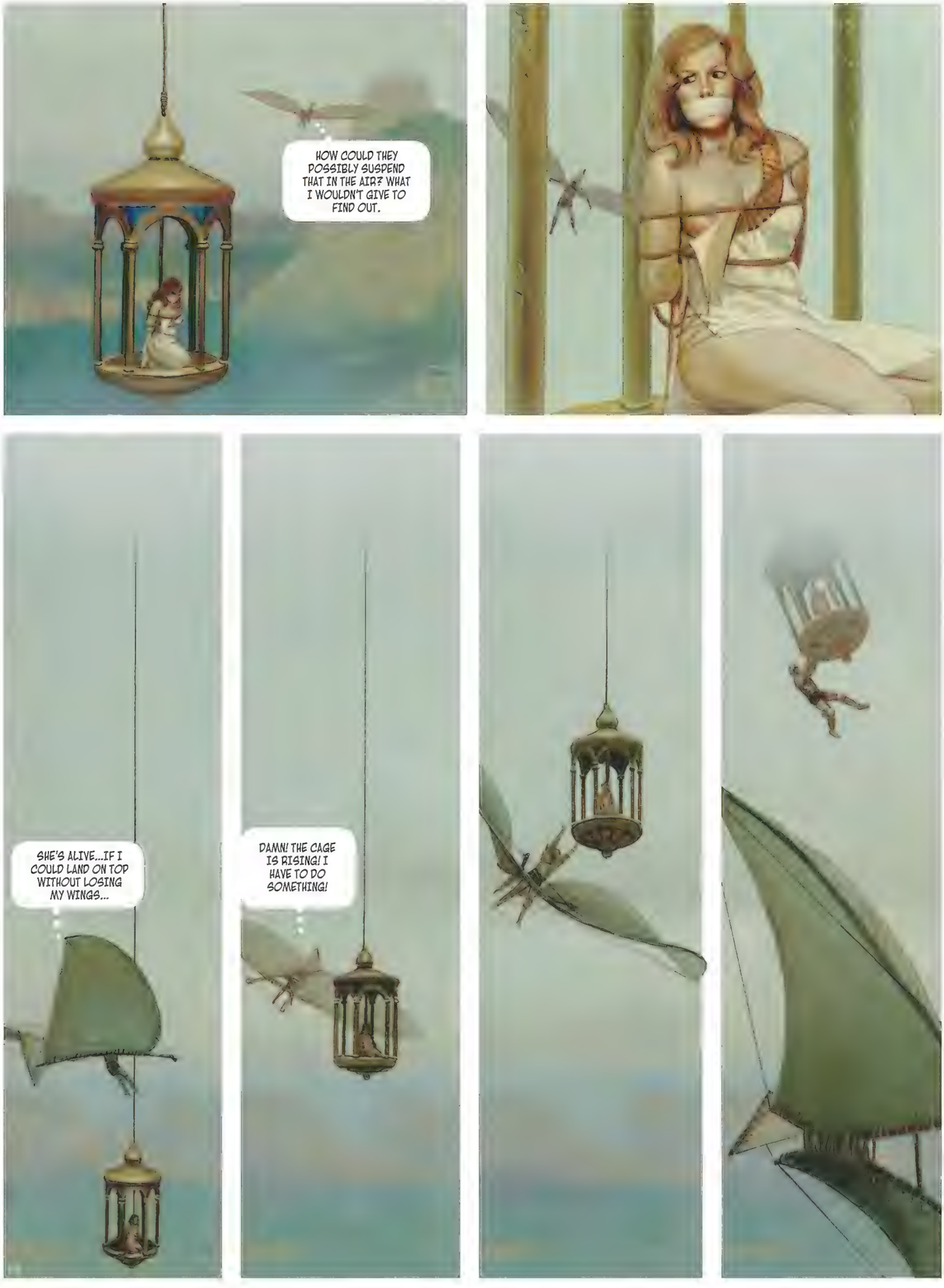
I DO NOT THINK YOU COULD DO ANYTHING...BUT COME. LET US GO UP THE MOUNTAIN AND I WILL EXPLAIN EVERYTHING.


THERE, ATOP THIS PEAK, IS WHERE WE MUST LEAVE THE FILLED SKINS. AT NIGHT, THE CAGE DISAPPEARS, THE GLOW DESCENDS AND THE SKINS ARE COLLECTED BY HOODED FIGURES. WE ARE FORBIDDEN FROM COMING HERE AT NIGHT.

AND THAT MASSIVE ROPE?
MORE OF THE MYSTERY. WE ARE FORBIDDEN TO TOUCH IT, OR MY DAUGHTER WILL DIE. WORST OF ALL WE DO NOT EVEN KNOW WHETHER SHE IS STILL ALIVE IN THAT DAMNED CAGE.

I CAN FEEL AN ASCENDING BREEZE. I COULD APPROACH THE CAGE AND SEE IF YOUR DAUGHTER STILL LIVES.
YOU CAN DO THAT?

OF COURSE, WITH THE WINGS THAT BROUGHT ME HERE. THEY ARE DOWN BELOW, IN YOUR TOWN.
THEN YOU WOULD HAVE MY ETERNAL THANKS.


HOW COULD THEY POSSIBLY SUSPEND THAT IN THE AIR? WHAT I WOULDN'T GIVE TO FIND OUT.
SHE'S ALIVE...IF I COULD LAND ON TOP WITHOUT LOSING MY WINGS...
DAMN! THE CAGE IS RISING! I HAVE TO DO SOMETHING!

GODS IN HEAVEN! WHAT IS THIS?

STAY CALM. EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE. I COME ON BEHALF OF YOUR FATHER.

THE FIRST STEP TO SETTING YOU FREE IS REMOVING YOUR BONDS...

YOU'VE MADE A GRAVE MISTAKE. NOW WE ARE BOTH PRISONERS.
WE'LL SEE ABOUT THAT.

SHE IS RIGHT. NOW BOTH OF YOU ARE PRISONERS OF THE CULT OF THE SACRED FIRE.
YOU WILL STAY HERE UNTIL THE RANSOM HAS BEEN PAID.
YOU, WARRIOR—STRIP YOURSELF OF YOUR WEAPONS INCLUDING YOUR ARMOR, AND TOSS THEM IN THE HOLE THROUGH WHICH YOU ENTERED.
24

THE KNIFE IS MY ONLY WEAPON...
DAMN YOU! THIS ARMOR COSTS A YEAR'S WAGES!
IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIFE, REMOVE YOUR BELT AS WELL. YOU CANNOT KEEP ANYTHING OF METAL.
MERCIFUL GODS! I SWEAR MY BELT BUCKLE IS NOT A WEAPON THAT I COULD FIGHT WITH!
BRASH WARRIOR! GIVE HIM A ROPE TO TIE UP THAT RIDICULOUS LOINCLOTH.
AND YOU, WARRIOR, BETTER YOU ACCEPT YOUR SITUATION. THE SLIGHTEST SUSPICIOUS MOVE AND YOU WILL DIE!

BIND THE MAN FIRST!

I'D SWEAR THAT THEIR LEADER IS NOT THE ONLY WOMAN HERE.
26

JUST AS I WOULD SWEAR THAT I'VE BEEN TRUSSED UP LIKE FOWL BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT SO SURE THEIR PRISON COULD HOLD ME.

THERE HAS TO BE A WEAK POINT TO JUSTIFY TYING ME UP SO MUCH...
27

OF COURSE, IF MY HANDS WERE LOOSE, IT WOULD BE EASY TO CLIMB THIS ROPE...

I HAVE TO GET LOOSE, SOMEHOW....

THERE'S NO WAY. THEY'VE TIED ME UP TOO WELL.
CRAK!
WELL! MIGHT I HAVE AN ADMIRER?
NOW I CAN GET OUT OF THIS CAGE.
I HOPE IT'S ANCHORED WELL UP THERE...
28

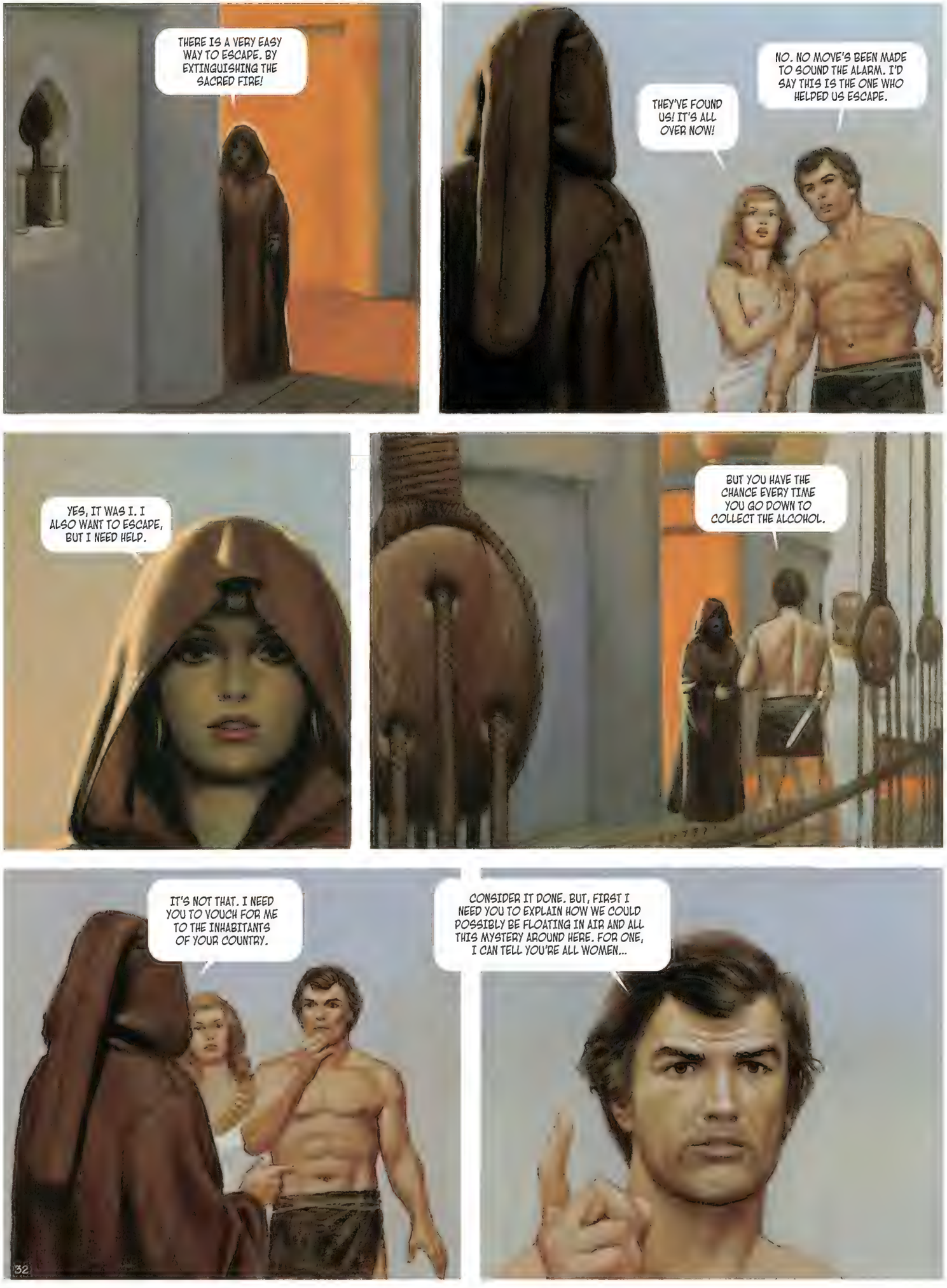
GREAT.
I HAVE TO FIND THE WEAK POINT IN THIS CELL...WHAT STRANGE WALLS, THEY GIVE IN TO PRESSURE!
THEY DON'T SEEM VERY STRONG...
SSRRR...
HEY! WHAT'S THIS? A HOLLOW WALL!
FOOP!
CARDBOARD! IT'S JUST REINFORCED CARDBOARD!
DID YOU SEE THAT? INCREDIBLE! I'LL SLICE SOME MORE CONFETTI AND WE'LL BE OUT OF HERE.

NO WONDER THEY TOOK MY BELT. ITS BUCKLE COULD HAVE SLICED THROUGH THE WALLS.

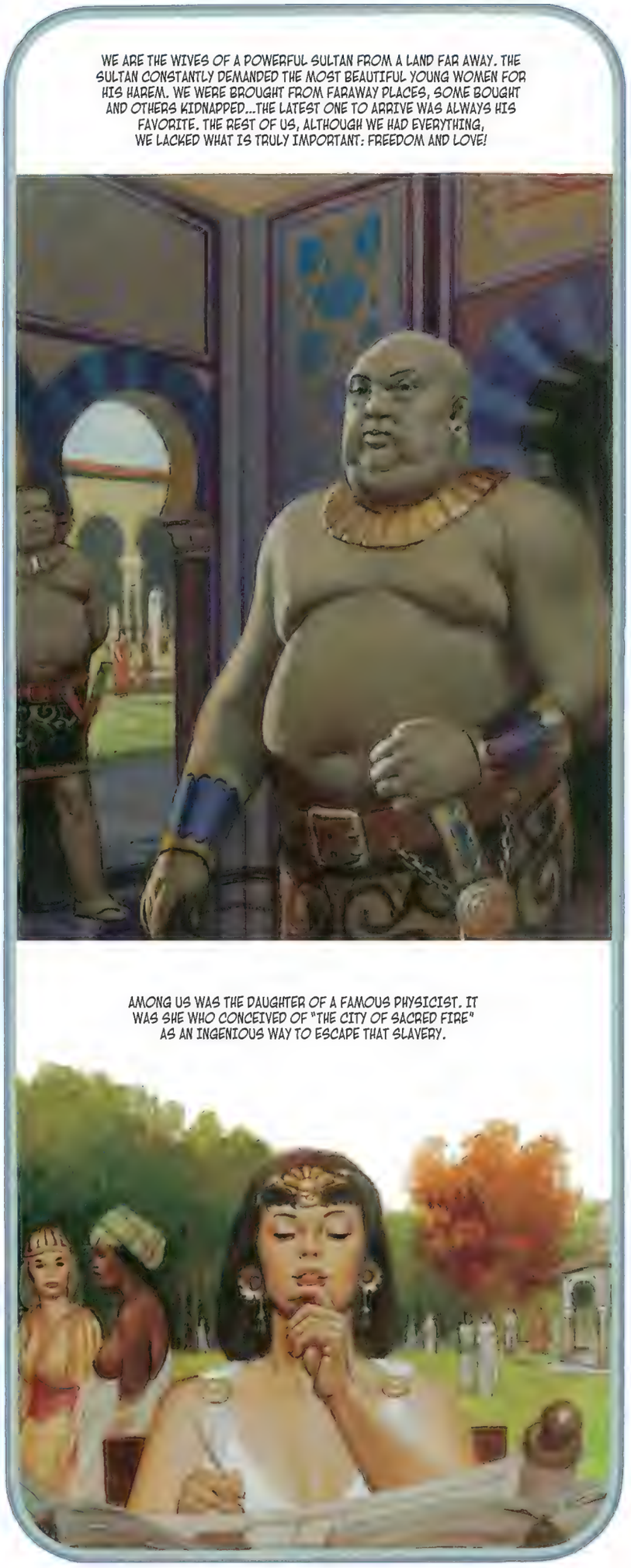
THAT LOOKS LIKE A WAY OUT.

TOO MANY PEOPLE... WE SHOULD GO ANOTHER WAY.
THAT MUST BE THE SACRED FIRE.

THIS WAY LOOKS BETTER.
LET'S GO TAKE A LITTLE TOUR.
DAMN! LOOKS LIKE FLYING IS THE ONLY WAY OUT OF HERE.
DEMONS IN HELL! THIS IS MAKING ME NERVOUS.
...WELL, WE'RE BACK TO WHERE WE STARTED! WE WENT ALL AROUND! THERE'S NO WAY OFF THIS BUBBLE IN THE SKY!


THERE IS A VERY EASY WAY TO ESCAPE. BY EXTINGUISHING THE SACRED FIRE!
THEY'VE FOUND US! IT'S ALL OVER NOW!
NO. NO MOVE'S BEEN MADE TO SOUND THE ALARM. I'D SAY THIS IS THE ONE WHO HELPED US ESCAPE.
YES, IT WAS I. I ALSO WANT TO ESCAPE, BUT I NEED HELP.
BUT YOU HAVE THE CHANCE EVERY TIME YOU GO DOWN TO COLLECT THE ALCOHOL.
IT'S NOT THAT. I NEED YOU TO VOUCH FOR ME TO THE INHABITANTS OF YOUR COUNTRY.
CONSIDER IT DONE. BUT, FIRST I NEED YOU TO EXPLAIN HOW WE COULD POSSIBLY BE FLOATING IN AIR AND ALL THIS MYSTERY AROUND HERE. FOR ONE, I CAN TELL YOU'RE ALL WOMEN...
32

YOU ARE RIGHT. WE ARE WOMEN... TAKE A GOOD LOOK. ALL ARE LIKE ME, YOUNG AND BEAUTIFUL... IN THE PRIME OF LIFE...THIS WILL HELP YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I AM GOING TO TELL YOU...


WE ARE THE WIVES OF A POWERFUL SULTAN FROM A LAND FAR AWAY. THE SULTAN CONSTANTLY DEMANDED THE MOST BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMEN FOR HIS HAREM. WE WERE BROUGHT FROM FARAWAY PLACES, SOME BOUGHT AND OTHERS KIDNAPPED...THE LATEST ONE TO ARRIVE WAS ALWAYS HIS FAVORITE. THE REST OF US, ALTHOUGH WE HAD EVERYTHING, WE LACKED WHAT IS TRULY IMPORTANT: FREEDOM AND LOVE!
AMONG US WAS THE DAUGHTER OF A FAMOUS PHYSICIST. IT WAS SHE WHO CONCEIVED OF "THE CITY OF SACRED FIRE" AS AN INGENIOUS WAY TO ESCAPE THAT SLAVERY.

WE EASILY CONVINCED THE SULTAN BY APPEALING TO HIS VANITY, ASSURING HIM HOW HAPPY WE WERE TO BE HIS AND TO LIVE IN HIS HAREM. WE TOLD HIM WE WISHED TO SHOW HIM OUR LOVE BY MAKING A GIFT UNLIKE ANYTHING THIS WORLD HAD EVER KNOWN AND THAT ONLY HE DESERVED. WE WERE TO BUILD A TRANSPORTABLE, FLOATING CITY FOR HIS TRAVELS THROUGH DESERTS AND LAKES. IT HAD TO BE LIGHT, MADE OF CARDBOARD, WICKER, AND BALSA WOOD, IN ORDER TO MOVE ON WHEELS. WE PROMISED HIM THAT WE WOULD WORK ON THE PROJECT AND WE WOULD NEED JUST HIS EUNUCHS AND VARIOUS BOAT BUILDERS.
IT SEEMED SILLY TO HIM, BUT, FLATTERED, HE AGREED TO EVERYTHING. AS PLANNED, SOON, HE LEFT US ALONE. FOR FIVE YEARS WE WORKED. THE HAPPIEST FIVE YEARS OF MY LIFE...FINALLY, ONE NIGHT, WE ANNOUNCED TO THE SULTAN THAT WE WOULD GIVE HIM THE BIG SURPRISE OF OUR FANTASTIC GIFT THE NEXT DAY. IT MUST HAVE BEEN QUITE A SURPRISE: IN THE MORNING WE HAD DISAPPEARED AS IF BY MAGIC. FURIOUS, HE SWORE TO KILL US ALL. HE MADE THIS OATH IN PUBLIC AND SO HE MUST UPHOLD IT.

THE SULTAN'S POWER IS SO GREAT THAT OUR SURVIVAL DEPENDS ON COMPLETE ANONYMITY. FROM THE BEGINNING WE KNEW THIS AND SWORE, UNDER PENALTY OF DEATH, THAT WE WOULD NEVER TELL OUR STORY TO ANYONE...BUT THE SITUATION HAS CHANGED.

FATE HAS SEEN THAT, UPON PASSING OVER THIS HIGH MOUNTAIN RANGE WITHOUT PROBLEMS, WE WOULD COME TO REST IN THIS STRANGE COUNTRY. I BELIEVE THE SULTAN'S POWER CANNOT REACH THIS FAR AND I CAN STAND IT NO LONGER. BEFORE, I WAS A PRISONER IN THE HAREM, NOW I'M A PRISONER HERE...

I GET IT, BUT I STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW THIS CITY STAYS AFLOAT!

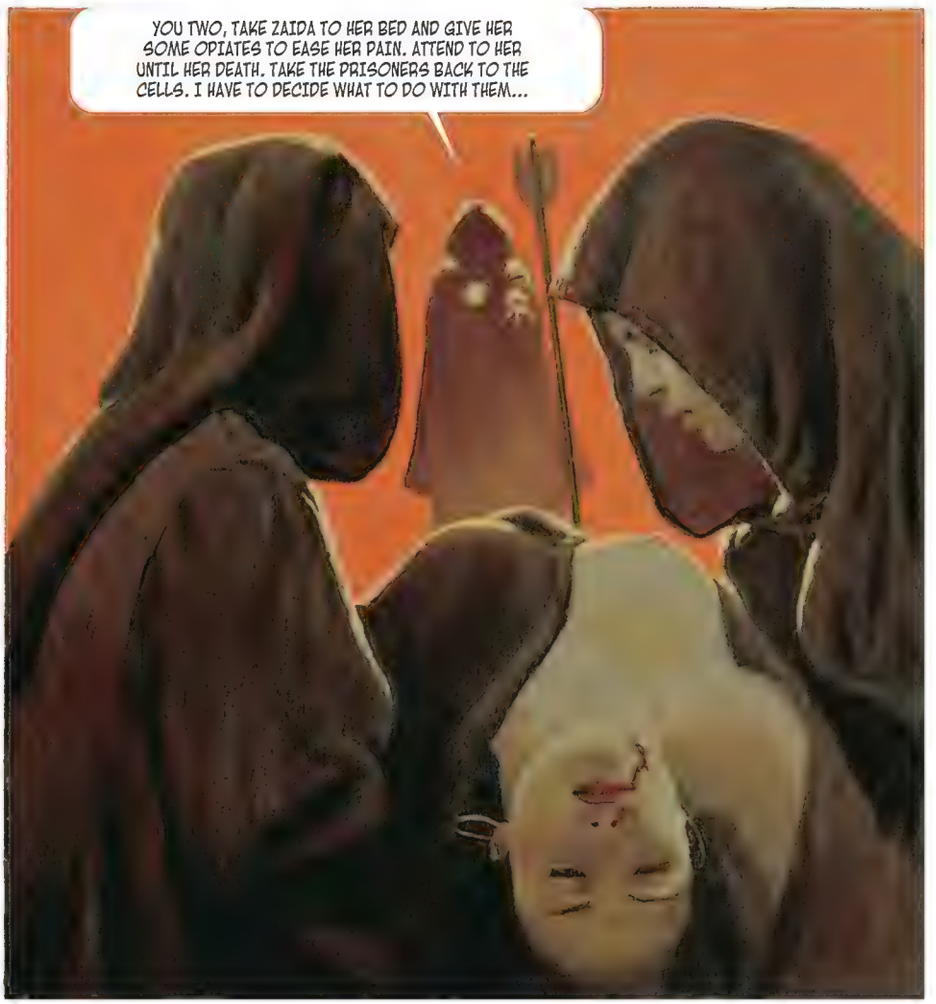
ITS SIMPLICITY WILL SURPRISE YOU. YOU SEE, THE FIRE IS...
ENOUGH, ZAIDA! SAY NO MORE!

NO! ANNA, NO!
36

HOW COULD YOU DO THIS!?

IF YOU THINK THAT WE ARE WEAK WOMEN, EASY TO DEFEAT, THINK AGAIN! RAISE YOUR WEAPON AND YOU'LL SHARE ZAIDA'S FATE.
I KNOW WELL WHAT SOME WOMEN ARE CAPABLE OF.

NOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED. YOU KNOW TOO MUCH FOR US TO ALLOW YOU TO LEAVE.
37


YOU TWO, TAKE ZAIDA TO HER BED AND GIVE HER SOME OPIATES TO EASE HER PAIN. ATTEND TO HER UNTIL HER DEATH. TAKE THE PRISONERS BACK TO THE CELLS. I HAVE TO DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH THEM...

LEAVE ME... LET ME DIE ALONE...
I MUST TURN OFF THE ALCOHOL VALVE...
THEY ALL FEEL AS I DO... I WILL FREE THEM...
BY THE GODS...I DON'T KNOW IF I'LL MAKE IT...
38

RRRRWOOOOMM...
THE FLAME! IT'S OUT OF CONTROL!
QUICKLY—WE MUST GET TO THE REGULATION CHAMBER!
ZAIDA!
SHE DIED HOLDING THE HANDLE. I TURNED IT OFF BUT I THINK IT'S TOO LATE...
NOW EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON THE ROPES...

DESPITE HAVING SHUT OFF THE FIRE, THE ACCUMULATED THRUST PROVED TOO POWERFUL...
CLAK
THE MOORING ROPES HAVE BROKEN!
SOUND THE ALARM! QUICKLY!
WONGNN...
THE RAPID ASCENT ALARM! WE MUST GO QUICKLY TO THE PRESSURE CHAMBER!
THEY'VE DESERTED US! SOMETHING SERIOUS MUST BE GOING ON...WE MUST BE RISING.
IF WE CONTINUE LIKE THIS, WE'LL END UP RISING ABOVE THE CLOUDS.
I FEEL FAINT...I CAN'T GET ANY AIR!

YOU NEED OXYGEN...IF THIS KEEPS RISING, YOU'LL DIE OF ASPHYXIATION....I WONDER... MAYBE THERE'S A CHANCE...
IF WE GET INTO THE CAGE AND LET IT FALL...MAYBE IF WE'RE LUCKY...
LOOK!
ALERT! ALERT! LIFT UP THE BRIDGE! HURRY!
41

QUICKLY, SIR! LOOK OUT THE WINDOW. IT'S INCREDIBLE!
WHAT THE DEVIL IS THAT?

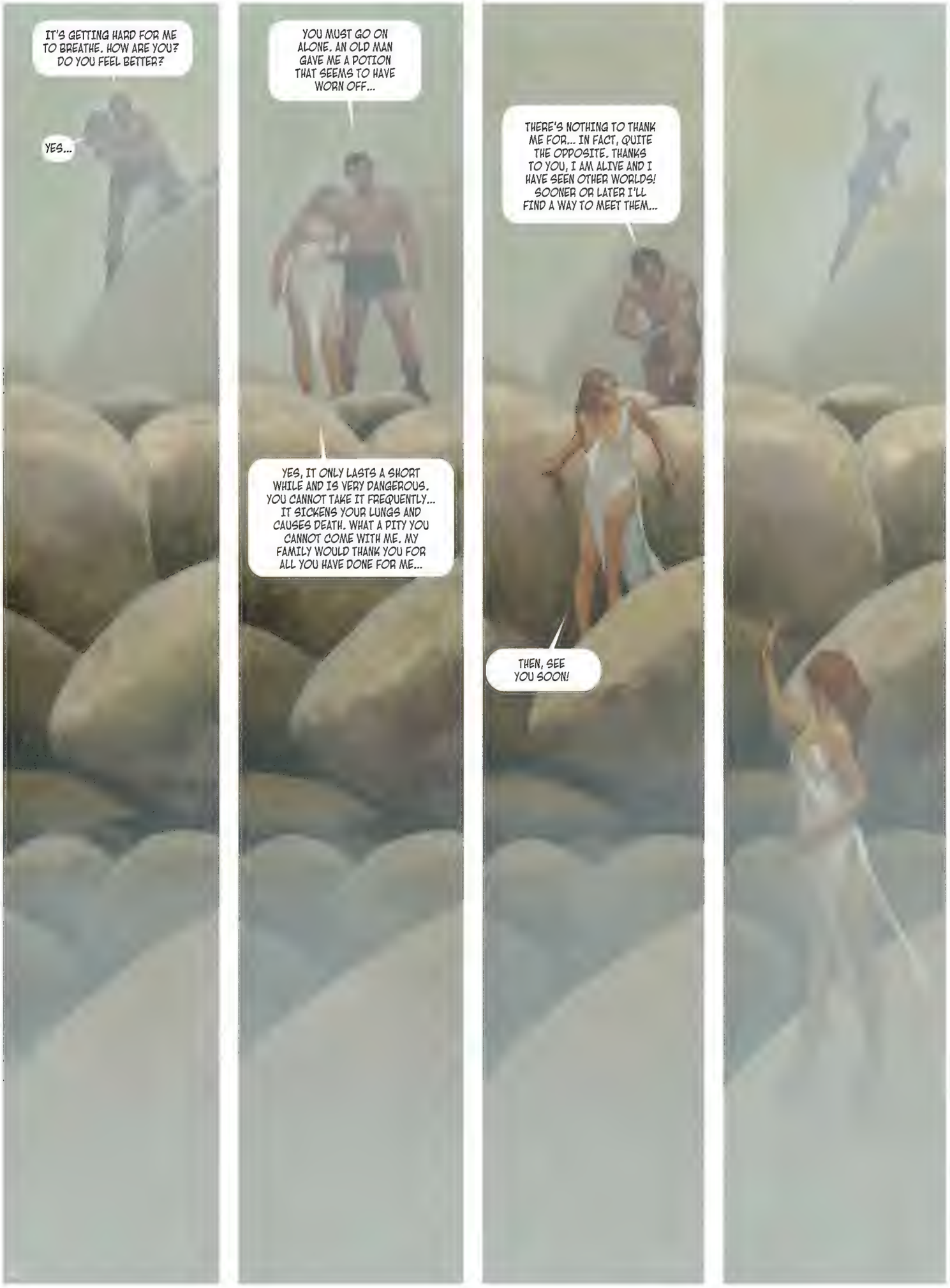
THIS WILL BREAK THE FALL JUST ENOUGH.
WE'RE OUT OF THE CLOUDS, AND IN MY COUNTRY, BUT THIS IS STILL ASCENDING FAST!

JUST MY LUCK! WE ARE GOING TO LAND RIGHT ON THE PALACE OF THAT STINKING PIG!
THEY'RE COMING OUR WAY! DO SOMETHING! AFTER THEM!
I FEAR IT'S TOO LATE...
I KNOW THAT FACE... IT'S THE MERCENARY!
IT CANNOT BE HIM! IT MUST BE HIS SPIRIT COMING TO EXACT VENGEANCE!

IT'S STILL RISING. HE'S GOING TO PASS OVER US!
CRAK!
HE'S KNOCKED THE KEYSTONE OFF THE DOME! IT'S GOING TO COLLAPSE!
BROOOUUMMMM...
45

I STILL DON'T KNOW HOW WE HAVE GOTTEN OUT OF ALL THIS MESS, BUT AT LEAST WE'RE SAVED.

GODS, WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THEM...? NOW I MUST GET THIS GIRL DOWN AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.


IT'S GETTING HARD FOR ME TO BREATHE. HOW ARE YOU? DO YOU FEEL BETTER?
YES...
YOU MUST GO ON ALONE. AN OLD MAN GAVE ME A POTION THAT SEEMS TO HAVE WORN OFF...
YES, IT ONLY LASTS A SHORT WHILE AND IS VERY DANGEROUS. YOU CANNOT TAKE IT FREQUENTLY... IT SICKENS YOUR LUNGS AND CAUSES DEATH. WHAT A PITY YOU CANNOT COME WITH ME. MY FAMILY WOULD THANK YOU FOR ALL YOU HAVE DONE FOR ME...
THERE'S NOTHING TO THANK ME FOR... IN FACT, QUITE THE OPPOSITE. THANKS TO YOU, I AM ALIVE AND I HAVE SEEN OTHER WORLDS! SOONER OR LATER I'LL FIND A WAY TO MEET THEM...
THEN, SEE YOU SOON!

MEET VICENTE SEGRELLES

In case you were interested in learning more about this series and learning a bit about its author, you can see that at the end of each volume, I've prepared these supplementary pages divided by topic. In them I will explain how and why I started The Mercenary, my way of working, anecdotes, and interesting tidbits about the way that I write comics and especially the direct relationship between the issues and my passions. I have illustrated each supplement with many samples my work, and everything that you will see, from the illustrations to the models and sculptures, was done by me.

BACKGROUND

When I was little, just like most children, I liked to draw—although in my case it was a somewhat unhealthy hobby. I was born in 1940 and my childhood took place during the Spanish post-war period, an era of hardships and rationing. I remember that, when I was very young, but old enough to remember with some clarity, I secretly got up at 6 in the morning and shut myself in a room so I could draw, making sure to cover the crack at the bottom of the door with a towel so that the light shining through wouldn't give me away. They found out and my nocturnal adventure was over, but I continued drawing during allowed hours. Storybook illustrations fascinated me and I tried to copy them. Later came comics and especially movies.

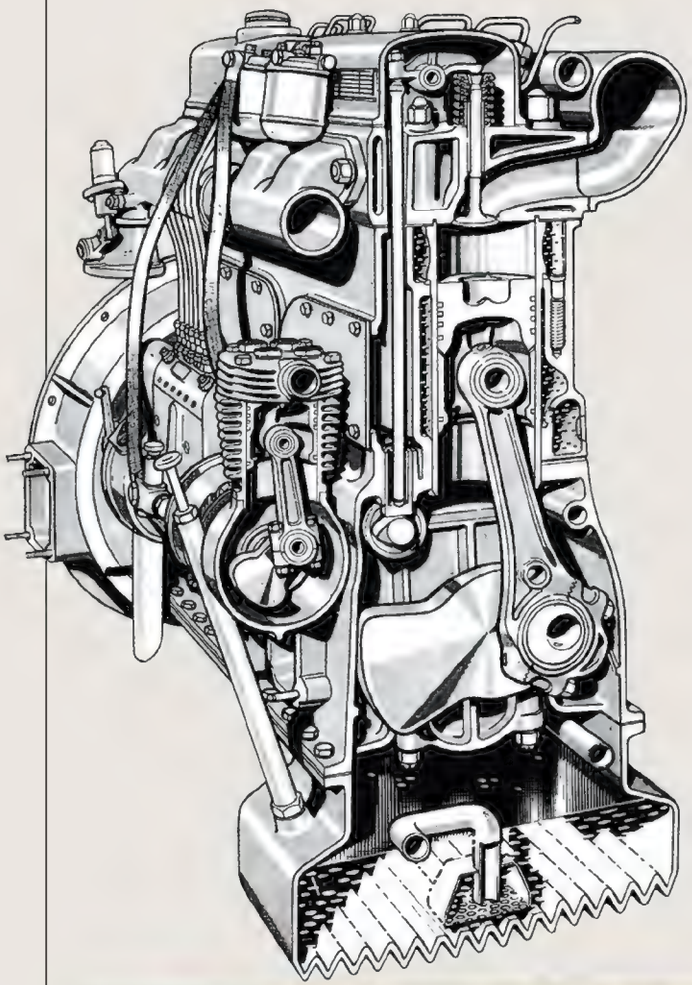
And then there was the influence of my uncle José Segrelles, my father's brother. Uncle Pepe, as we called him at home, was a well-known illustrator in the 1930s, a great watercolor painter specialized in fantasy. In the apartment where we lived, we had books illustrated by him and a few framed reproductions of his work, but the crucial thing was the artistic atmosphere that I breathed in at home. The "Uncle Pepe" atmosphere, as would be expected, affected me a lot and framed my professional aspirations for the future: my dream was always to be a painter-illustrator.

But life took me down many roads before reaching this profession. My stint in a truck factory and in advertising did not quash my vocation, and in my free time I continued drawing.

And finally I achieved it, first illustrating trading cards, then research books, and finally book covers.

When I reached the comics world, I was already much older than is usual for authors in this specialty, but I had a background of hundreds of covers in a wide variety of topics including fantasy and dragons, some of them mounted and ridden by warriors, iconography that I would use to create samples and to find work in comics.

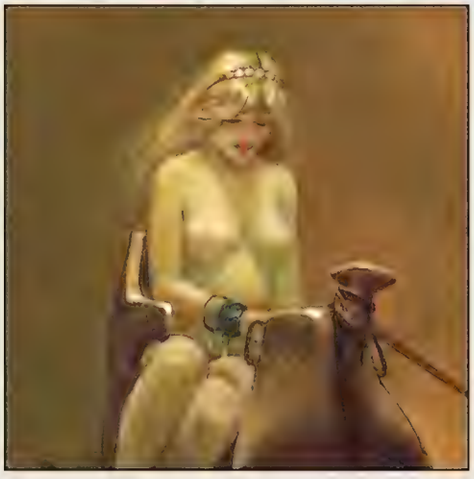
A GOOD EDUCATION?



My education was, at the very least, atypical for an illustrator. At that time, my parents wanted us to have secure jobs, so upon turning 14, I entered the apprentice school of an enormous, and to me fascinating, company in Barcelona: they manufactured trucks, but also an incredible sports car, munitions for the Hispano-Suiza 20 mm cannon, and better yet had a test bench for airplane motors.

At the school they taught many topics, from geometry and physics to classes about materials and practical labs with machinery, but what I liked best was technical drawing. In the third year, when I had to choose, I specialized as a drafter and after practicing for a short time, I entered the technical publications department which was where they drew the catalogs of replacement parts and maintenance manuals. They were India ink line drawings, perspectives based on the plans, or cross-sections and mechanical schematics. The illustration on the left is one of the many that I did. At age 17, and with a strong desire to draw and experiment, I really revolutionized the department with a more modern style and drawings in color. The supervisors indulged me and when I returned from military service, I already had the highest professional category that one could achieve: Designing Draftsman A. I had stable work and a secure future at the factory, but I had other artistic aspirations and started to look for work at advertising agencies, which was closer to what I wanted to do. It was not easy, the number of applicants was high, but at the age of 24, I left the factory upon being accepted at a major agency in Barcelona.

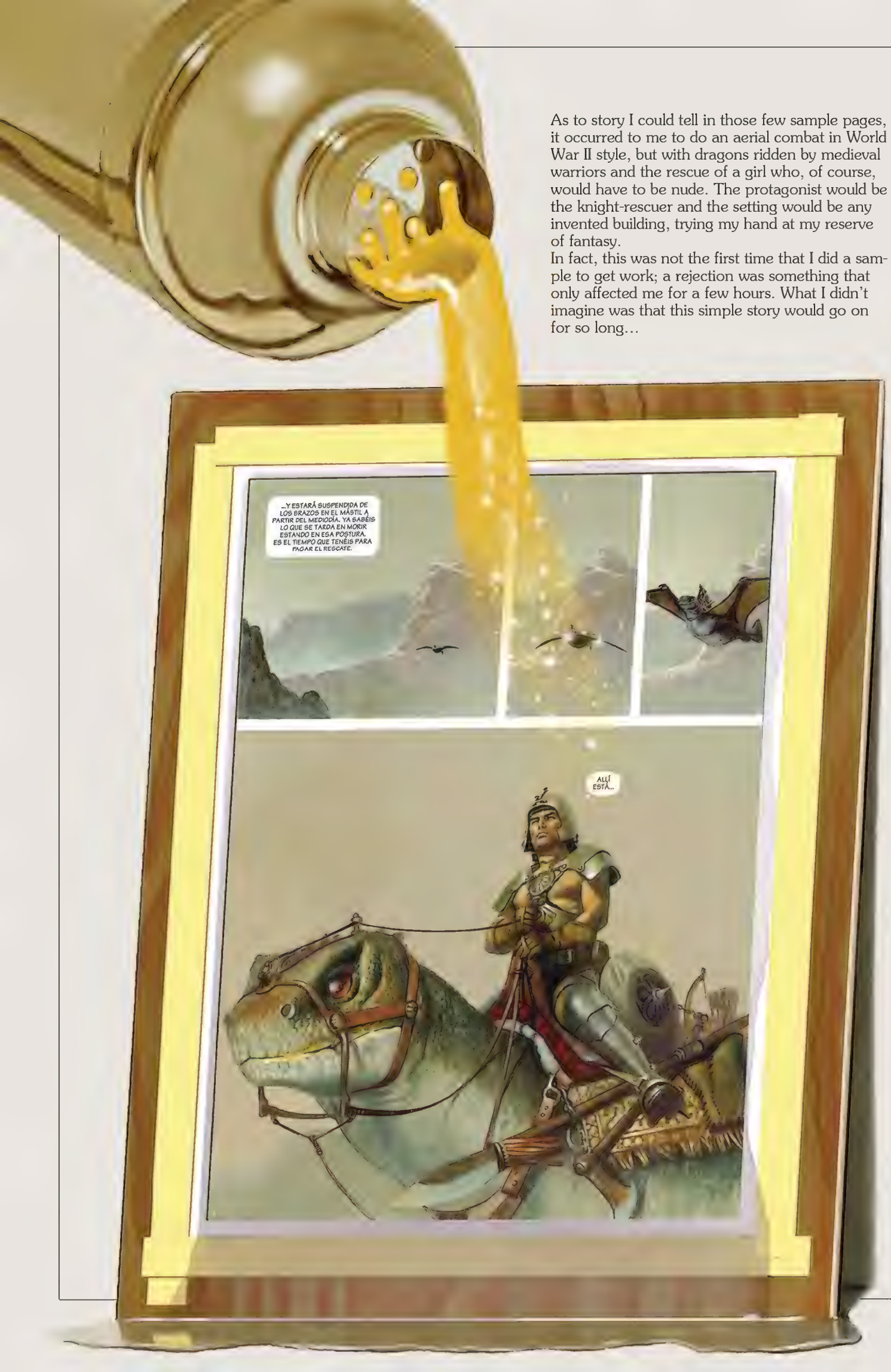
Overall, my time at the truck factory was not a waste in my artistic training. On the contrary, I think that it gave me knowledge that has allowed me to create my own style. I left the factory having mastered perspective and drawing of ellipses, something basic for an illustrator at that time, but it taught me many other things that can be observed in my illustrations. For example, metal subjected to stress stretches before breaking, which is what happens to the rings that secure the hot air balloon. Throughout *The Mercenary* there are countless details that perhaps the reader doesn't notice, but they are there. There are mechanisms that, if they were to be manufactured, most would work.



Some interesting circumstances got me into comics. In the middle of the 1970s, at the beginning of Spanish democracy, there was a repeal of many prohibitions from the dictatorship in Spain that affected culture. This prompted a kind of revolutionary movement in the comics world that led intellectuals to investigate what was behind this curious thing that now was called "comics" and used to be called "tebeos" (silly, nonsense). The media talked about them and soon this dying genre revived itself. Editors with new magazines and illustrators appeared. Competition grew which led to "full color" pages which was more marketable although at the beginning it was only a few pages out of the magazine.
At that time, I had switched illustrator agents and the new one, in addition to selling our work, had become an editor of comics magazines. I liked comics and, seeing that there was demand for color stories, I proposed to my agent that I do some sample pages for free, with the intention of expanding my field of work. Naturally, the agent-editor said yes. I painted covers in oil paints. This technique was completely unusual in the comic world, but it was a way of working that I felt very comfortable with and I wasn't going to change my system. I wasn't sure how this might be accepted, particularly due to the absence of the classic black ink lines and the novelty of the technique, but despite my doubts, I couldn't just stop doing what I knew best.
To have some guarantee of success, it had to be something remarkable, but given the circumstances, it also had to be easy and comfortable to do and for that reason, better to do it all from my imagination. I did not want to start a period piece that would require me to research tedious documentation about clothing, buildings, furniture, and settings. The most practical would be to pick a fantasy topic and invent everything. I have always been a big fan of the middle ages with their armor and dragons, as well as weapons, castles, aircraft, the female form, and, especially, orientalist fantasy, so I got down to it and mixed all of these ingredients.

As to story I could tell in those few sample pages, it occurred to me to do an aerial combat in World War II style, but with dragons ridden by medieval warriors and the rescue of a girl who, of course, would have to be nude. The protagonist would be the knight-rescuer and the setting would be any invented building, trying my hand at my reserve of fantasy.

In fact, this was not the first time that I did a sample to get work; a rejection was something that only affected me for a few hours. What I didn't imagine was that this simple story would go on for so long...

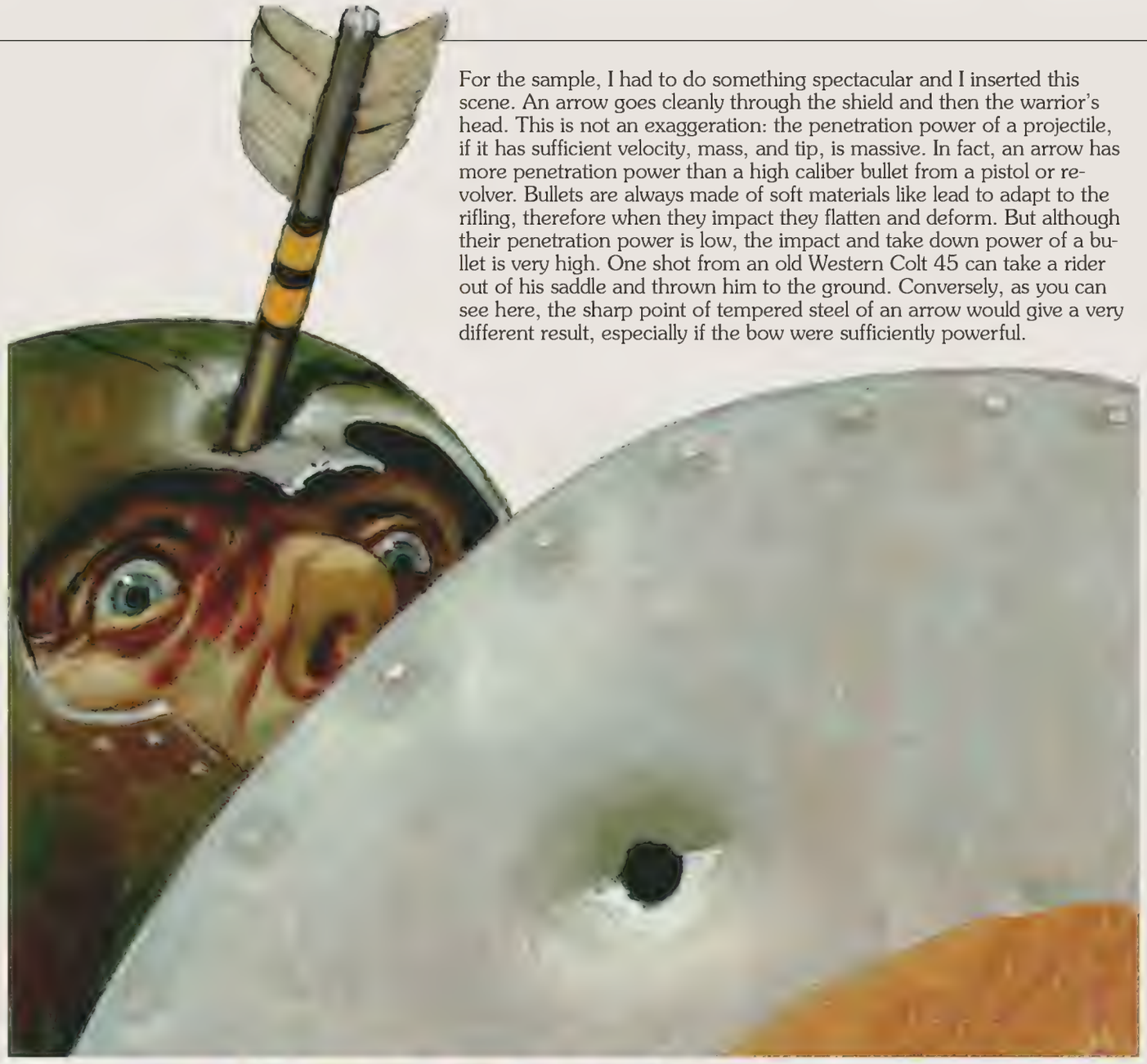


One of the issues that I had at the beginning was how to deal with saddles. In all the iconography about the topic, it was common to see dragons with four legs and two wings. I had even painted covers with flying dragons in which I had given them this configuration. But I was never comfortable with it. It was not logical, mainly because there was an evident basic structural failure. Even accepting the wide margins allowed by fantasy and admitting that nature has done stranger things, I thought that with this solution we were creating an animal that was absurd to a certain point, because any being with wings on its back, whether reptile, human, or angel, needs very marked musculature to move them, an issue that is always avoided. So it seemed more logical to use the solution adopted by nature where the front feet of primitive flying reptiles were sacrificed, transforming them into the bird wings that we are all familiar with.

For the first flying dragon that the Mercenary rides, I was inspired by the head of a tuatara lizard, a species dating back to much earlier than dinosaurs and the only one that has survived to modern times. It is said, as well, that they can live up to 100 years. These exceptional characteristics were what led me to use it as a flying dragon in my samples.

As for the warrior, in principle he was nothing specific, just a character in these circumstances, so I didn't put too much into him: partial body armor was less work and one supposes that it is enough if he protects himself with his shield. At that time, I already had experience drawing armor and all kinds of weapons, of which I am a big fan. Years before, in 1978, I had written and illustrated a monograph about this topic called *Universal History of Weapons*. In these supplements you can see some of the illustrations from that book.

For the sample, I had to do something spectacular and I inserted this scene. An arrow goes cleanly through the shield and then the warrior's head. This is not an exaggeration: the penetration power of a projectile, if it has sufficient velocity, mass, and tip, is massive. In fact, an arrow has more penetration power than a high caliber bullet from a pistol or revolver. Bullets are always made of soft materials like lead to adapt to the rifling, therefore when they impact they flatten and deform. But although their penetration power is low, the impact and take down power of a bullet is very high. One shot from an old Western Colt 45 can take a rider out of his saddle and thrown him to the ground. Conversely, as you can see here, the sharp point of tempered steel of an arrow would give a very different result, especially if the bow were sufficiently powerful.



In the 14th century, there were some two-meter-long bows of such power that, in the battles of Crécy and Agincourt, the Welsh, English, and Flemish archers decimated the French nobility protected by shining, heavy armor.
Gerald of Wales, a clerk of the era, testified to the power of these bows during the battle of Abergavenny: one of William de Braose's mounted soldiers was shot by one of these arrows, which punctured the soldier's armor, chain mail, thigh, breeches, the chain mail again, the armor again on the other side, and the saddle tree wood, before sinking deeply into the horse's flank, killing it.

Just as a well-proportioned young horse with good musculature, a tiger, or a peacock are instinctively beautiful to us, so too is the human body. This, intensified by sensuality, acquires extraordinary dimensions and for this reason a well-constructed, nude human body has always been a point of reference in art. To me, as a painter, it is fascinating to paint female nudes.

As an illustrator I have done many covers including partial nudes. On very few occasions were they fully nude and much less on covers for the USA where censorship did not allow it. Here, in Spain, with the advent of democracy, we went from an opaque, ecclesiastic censorship of everything, to the wildest and most widespread openness. Given these circumstances, and as I had to call attention, if I wanted my samples to have a future, I dared to include a full nude.

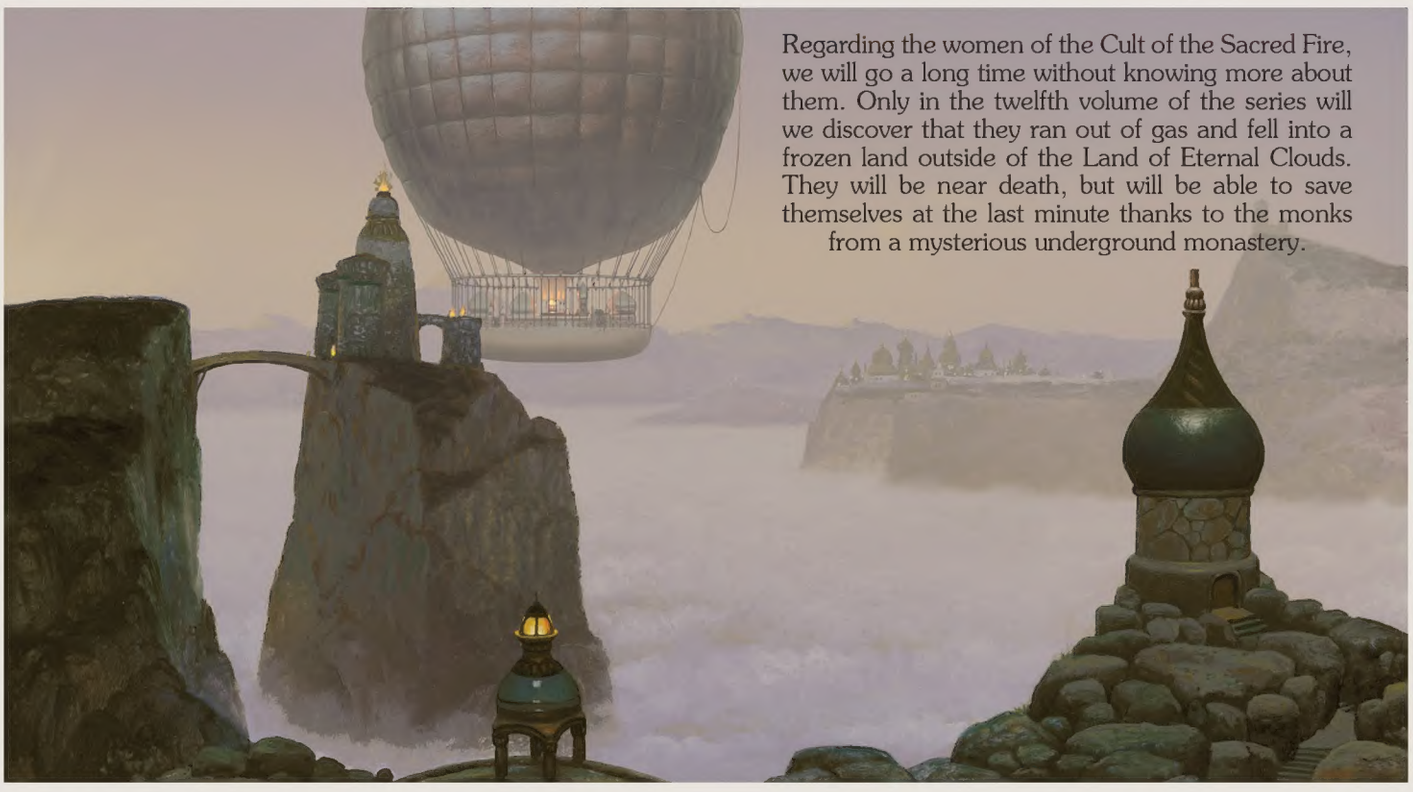
And the day came. It was 1979, there sat the six finished pages. It was a different comic, revolutionary to a certain extent at that time, since it was painted entirely in oils. So my agent took the samples to an Italian book fair to see the reactions of the other editors. It could be a success or could also be completely rejected, especially by the most orthodox who liked line drawings and, if possible, black and white. I had used all of my resources to make sure the samples would call attention, but it would not be the first time that my hopes in search for work would be dashed. But no, my agent came back excited: the samples had been such a success that he brought a half dozen signed pre-contracts.

After the initial excitement, I realized that I had a new problem: I had to continue the story. I had always liked to write but had never written a script. What's more, I didn't even know where to start. But maybe due to this, and due to being new in the world of comics, I had many new ideas taking root in my passions that could be used. So I started to think about how to extend the story. The ideas, I don't know why, would occur to me in the middle of the night and I can't count how many times since then I've gotten up in the middle of the night to jot down something interesting because I know that in the morning I won't remember.

In this first issue of The Mercenary everything was chaotic because, in addition to having to alternate that with working on covers, there was no pre-set script. I was adding ideas as I went along, and in fact you can see that there are three different stories: the initial rescue of the girl, giving her back to her husband, and the adventure that happens under the clouds with the appearance of the hot air balloon. But the first thing I had to do in order to continue with the story was find a suitable setting to justify the presence of these flying animals.

Also, I had to justify the absence of dragons in the rest of the land. Something like that could only happen by locating the story in an isolated, lost civilization up in the heights of some remote place, without possible contact with other cultures... A land of eternal clouds occurred to me, where, with time and infinite patience, man had been able to domesticate reptiles.

Here you can see two unpublished panoramas of the Land of Eternal Clouds. They are taken from an illustrated story version of this volume, published in France. Look closely at the one on the left because it says many things. To start, it summarizes the first part of the volume that you have just read, but it also reveals, in some way, the size and way of life of this strange country. You can see that it is large and mountainous but has wide plateaus that allow for food to be grown. There are large cities and there is the lighthouse, necessary for nocturnal navigation in a valley full of cliffs and jagged outcroppings. Or the dragon bones that the Mercenary used to construct his glider: strong but hollow to lighten the load of the flying animals.



Regarding the women of the Cult of the Sacred Fire, we will go a long time without knowing more about them. Only in the twelfth volume of the series will we discover that they ran out of gas and fell into a frozen land outside of the Land of Eternal Clouds. They will be near death, but will be able to save themselves at the last minute thanks to the monks from a mysterious underground monastery.

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